

# The Lost Generation



An Armistice Day Article

*by*

J. B. PRIESTLEY

"We flung away young manhood  
as if it were dirt  
and now  
we are paying the price."

"AND the men who were boys when I was a boy will sit and drink with me": thus the poet. I hope he is luckier than I am. I belong to the wrong generation. Most of the men who were boys when I was a boy cannot sit and drink with me. Loos and Gallipoli and the Somme did for them. They went and saved something and never came back. What it was they saved I cannot exactly tell, but I do know that I have never seen anything since 1918 that was worth their sacrifice.

When people wonder what has been wrong with England these last twelve years it seems to me that they forget the War. It is all very simple. The men who would be assuming leadership now, in politics, the professions, the arts, business, if there had been no war, are dead.

Who can tell what genius was poured down that vast drain? We can only guess, but those of us who remember those ardent and generous spirits, nearly always the first to go, can make a tragically shrewd guess. We flung away brilliant young manhood as if it were so much dirt, and now we are paying the price for it. There is still a flourishing pre-war generation, and there is, of course, a flourishing, if not markedly vital, post-war generation. But in between there was a generation that belonged to the war itself, that grew to manhood in the trenches, and now it is a remnant.

This is the generation to which I belong, for I celebrated my twenty-first birthday in 1915 in the front line. I have a few good friends and a great many acquaintances; but sometimes I feel like an old man, for I seem to know intimately more dead men than living ones. To think about an old playing field is to see a crowd of ghosts. I know very well that a man may have been killed in battle and yet have been a poor creature.

Yet it is not sentimentalism that makes me declare emphatically that the most eager, promising, and finest members of my generation were lost to us through the war. I know it for a fact. I knew them, was with them. We who are left—the lucky ones—are a

miserable remnant ; and sometimes I wonder if any of us are quite sane, even though we may never have appeared in a police court and pleaded our war service.

I doubt if you can grow to manhood under such circumstances—if you can spend the most impressionable years of your life among shells and bloodstained barbed wire, and be quite normal. There are wounds of the soul as well as wounds of the body. In the life of a young man there is a period—let us say between the ages of nineteen and twenty-three—when, though he may be working hard at a university or learning a business, he can lead what is on the whole a carefree, cheerfully irresponsible existence.

It is the age at which young men sit up very late at night, smoking brand-new pipes, drinking beer, and gigantically settling the affairs of the universe.

It is also the age at which, very idealistically, they first fall in love, and take to writing sonnets, after illuminating experiences at college dances.

My generation missed all that. It spent that period watching its dearest friends being killed. And when, after the war, it came back, blinking, bewildered, it had to grab a livelihood, and do it when everybody seemed to be greedy and grabbing.

Can you wonder then that we seem at times a trifle hysterical, rather bitter ? Perhaps we don't ; perhaps we seem jolly, healthy-minded fellows ; but then you are not there when two or three of us are gathered together.

Writing, then, as one of this remnant, possibly half-witted, I will confess that I do not understand this world at all. I do not understand people's sense of values. I cannot gather exactly what it is they want to get out of life. Take this war business as an example. Learned and industrious men, after burrowing among documents for years, give us long books on the causes of the Great War, and you pay your money and you take your choice.

But the real cause of the war could be set down on a postcard. It was the inevitable result of people standing about, their fingers on triggers, expecting a war.

Everybody who was in the trenches will remember how, one night when all was quiet, some young ass of a sentry would fire a few quick rounds at nothing, just to warm his hands. So a German sentry would loose off a few rounds. Then more English, more Germans. The machine-guns would join in. Then the light artillery and the trench mortars on both sides. Then the heavy artillery would be called in, until finally the night would be a daft inferno. That is war. And that is how the war started.

The most dangerous lunatics we have had to do with this century have been the "Be Prepared" agitators. To be prepared, you have to amass big guns and little guns and heaps of explosive. Once you have done that, the rest follows. Some fool gets a fright and pulls a trigger—and then you are off. You cannot have dangerous weapons without wanting, at some time, to use them. We are not in the habit of killing one another where I live, being nice peaceable ratepayers; but suppose we were told that murder was inevitable and all began to go about armed to the teeth, what do you think would happen? Why, very soon the place would be littered with corpses. All those people who go about saying that war is inevitable and giving us their views on the next war are either dangerous lunatics or criminals. They ought to be locked up and fed on bread and water.

I hardly ever go to a cinema without wondering if there is a glimmer of sense in this world, for at the cinema, in the news reels, they are fond of showing you the latest developments in the technique of mass murder, the airplanes that will drop unheard-of bombs, the tanks that can cross rivers, and so forth.

And there people sit, placidly looking on, eating chocolates and holding hands. Nobody says, "Wait a minute! What are these things for? When that airplane buries or suffocates the population of half a city, when those tanks shatter men's spines or drive men's bodies deep into the mud, what is to be the new excuse?"

In other cinemas, in other countries, they are proudly exhibiting pictures of their own new bombing planes or tanks, and everybody there is placidly looking on too. And nobody says, "Why? Why? Why?"

But one day some fool, whose finger has been itching at the trigger too long, will fire a shot. And next time there won't be any learned and industrious men writing long books on the causes of it all. There won't be any learned and industrious men, and there won't be any books.

There will only be a few idiots gibbering among the ruins. And sometimes, even now, I feel like one of them.

*Reprinted for the Peace Committee of the Society of Friends  
Friends House, Euston Road, London, N.W.1  
by kind permission of the 'Evening Standard'  
and Mr. J. B. Priestley*

*1d. per copy, 9d. per doz., 5s. per 100, post free.*  
FROM FRIENDS PEACE COMMITTEE.

HEADLEY BROTHERS  
London; and Ashford, Kent